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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 7764
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 6034
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0238
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003115

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: RED CONSTITUTION DAY RALLY PEACEFUL

REF: A. BANGKOK 3067 (RED-SHIRTS SET THEIR SIGHTS ON
DECEMBER)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2405 (THAILAND'S MARCHING SEASON)

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Sensitive but unclassified, please treat accordingly.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, or "red-shirts") rallied at the Democracy Monument in downtown Bangkok December 10 to mark Thailand's Constitution Day holiday. The gathering, which at its peak included over 20,000 people, was peaceful and largely free from the vitriolic rhetoric that has marked previous UDD rallies. As promised, red-shirt agitator Maj. Gen. Khatthiya Sawasdiphol, aka Seh Daeng, was present, as were dozens of black-clad guards identified by Khatthiya as thahan phraan (paramilitary rangers). Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra addressed the crowd via video link and led a candle-lighting ceremony in honor of King Bhumibol's December 5 birthday. Red-shirt core leader Vira Musikapong announced during the rally that he would step down from his position as UDD Chairman next year, while promising more vigorous action to force the Abhisit government from office in 2010.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Comment: The subdued nature of this meeting--welcome given the highly charged talk that has come out of the red-shirt camp of late--should not be mistaken as a sign that the UDD is backing off. With the King's birthday festivities only recently concluded--indeed, the rally interrupted the week-long festivities marking the birthday along Ratchadamnoen Avenue--there was a palpable tone of reverence for the monarchy present during the rally, as well as a notable reduction in the vitriol usually aimed at Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thuaaksuban, and Privy Council President Gen. Prem Tinsulanond (with the latter attacked, but not by name this time). With the government's decision to not invoke the Internal Security Act (ISA) for this rally, there were no soldiers present, contributing to a more relaxed atmosphere. UDD leaders promised to continue their efforts in January, portending a return to their usual fiery rhetoric aimed at bringing down the Abhisit administration; red leader Jaran told us at an evening event December 8 to expect February to be a truly hot month. We will continue to reiterate our basic message advocating peaceful expression of political views and non-resort to violence in meetings with red leaders (REF A).

End Summary and Comment.

GENERALLY SUBDUED ATMOSPHERE

13. (SBU) The red-shirt movement held its largest rally in Bangkok since September (REF B), gathering at the Democracy Monument on December 10. This rally lacked the tense undercurrent that has marked many previous UDD protests. The significantly reduced security presence, a function of the government's decision not to invoke the ISA, was one factor; several people at the protest told us that the lack of a military presence helped reduce the tension. Proximity to the King's birthday, in the space used by the public to celebrate his life the previous week, was another. Crowd-control police were deployed around the immediate perimeter of the protest site, and worked side-by-side with UDD guards--identified by black armbands emblazoned with the word "guard"--to inspect the bags of people entering the area, and regular police were also stationed a few blocks further out from the site.

14. (U) Many of the speeches focused on the UDD's goal of reinstating the 1997 Constitution. The harsh criticisms of PM Abhisit, DPM Suthep, and Privy Council chairman Prem that have been staples of recent rallies were notably muted at this one, though Prem came in for some unnamed criticism. Keeping with the spirit of the week surrounding the King's birthday, speakers emphasized the UDD's commitment to upholding the monarchy as a central pillar to the Thai system. Several UDD core leaders also implored members of the red-shirt movement to ensure that the protests remained free of violence, a message that Mission has repeatedly underscored in recent meetings with the UDD leadership,

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including December 8 with red leader Jaran, who complained that, "every time we see you, you tell us to avoid violence." One UDD speaker from the stage castigated vendors who were selling alcohol, saying that the red-shirts needed to avoid any appearance of impropriety that the government could then use against them.

15. (SBU) As is the case with most red-shirt gatherings, the crowds were initially relatively small, before swelling after 6 PM. The Bangkok police, who have reliably estimated crowd sizes at previous protests, told us that there were approximately 23,000 at the rally's peak during Thaksin's phone-in. Red self-estimates were, as usual, overstated. UDD spokesman Sean Boonpracong claimed there were over 30,000 people in attendance. One ranger/thahan phraan we spoke with went so far as to claim at least 100,000 people attended the rally.

THAKSIN ADDRESSES CROWD, VIRA ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

16. (SBU) Thaksin's 35-minute address focused largely on the constitution, the theme of this rally on the national holiday commemorating the 1932 constitution marking Thailand's transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. In contrast to previous video addresses in which he had dressed casually, Thaksin appeared wearing a dark suit with a red tie, and stood in front of a large portrait of King Bhumibol. He then led the crowd in a candle-lighting ceremony to honor the King's 82nd birthday, followed by singing of songs for both the King and the Queen. One yellow-leaning contact caustically SMSed us after the appearance, noting that Thaksin had been advised to wear a pink tie, the color chosen this year to honor the King and his recovery from extended illness, yet went "red" instead.

17. (SBU) UDD Chairman Vira spoke after Thaksin. Vira promised that the UDD rallies would pick up in intensity in the New Year, with the aim of restoring the 1997 Constitution and chasing out the Abhisit administration. He then

announced his intent to resign as head of the UDD, stating that it was necessary for democratic development and stressing that the movement should not follow one single person. (Note: Vira told us in September 2008 that, as the eldest red leader, now over 60, it was time for him to step aside and allow a new generation to take over. However, the opposite occurred--his prominence within the red-shirt movement proceeded to increase, a likely sign of the respect he has across the spectrum, even among non-red-shirts. End Note.)

SEH DAENG AND THE RANGERS

¶18. (U) Trouble-making renegade MGEN Khattiya, aka Seh Daeng, was also present at the rally, but he did not address the crowd directly, nor did he appear on the stage. His reception among the crowd, however, was like that of a rock star. Surrounded by a human chain to hold people back, he signed t-shirts and other red paraphernalia as he worked his way through the mass of people.

¶19. (SBU) The thahan phraan who attended the gathering were notable in their black fatigues. In general, thahan praan, or rangers, are a paramilitary organization under the leadership of the army, which usually provides commissioned army officers to lead units. One thahan phraan told us he was one of ten that had come down from Mae Sot, along the Burma border, to provide protection for the red-shirts. In contrast to the UDD guards who mingled with Thai police, the thahan phraan around the outer perimeter stood apart from the police. Seh Daeng claimed that 1,000 thahan phraan would attend the protest, and thahan praan we spoke to also made that claim. Media reports estimated that only about 200 rangers were present, however.

JOHN